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AUTHOR Johnson, Janet R.

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ABSTRACT

A noticeable discrepancy continues to exist between the number of professional men and women who hold similarly ranked, higher level positions in educational administration, a phenomenon sometimes called the "glass ceiling." The potential of networking as a strategy for overcoming the gender gap is explored in this paper. Networking is viewed as a career enhancement strategy, an information system to provide and receive support. Obstacles to female participation in networks include lack of time and information, socialization factors, and undervaluing network utility. The inherent organizational structure of the system, however, remains a major barrier to women's advancement. Suggested solutions center on women developing their leadership skills and learning practical political strategies. Points for engaging in meaningful networks are offered. Networking is viewed as a tool for change, which is adaptable to individual women's characteristics, goals, and backgrounds. (18 references) (LMI)

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by

Janet R. Johnson

Educational Testing Service

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Networking: How To Permeate The Glass Ceiling - Some Highlights From Recent Studies Of Networking Among Women

There continues to be a noticeable discrepancy between the number of professional men and the number of professional women who hold similarly ranked, higher level positions in educational administration. This phenomenon has been widely studied and commented upon by numerous scholars and national groups. For example, in 1987 the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration issued a report entitled "Leaders for America's Schools," which refocused public attention on the underrepresentation of women and minorities in educational administration. This paper will consider the potential of one strategy, that of networking, for helping to overcome the gender gap.

By the late eighties, the women's movement had moved far beyond the brash, caustic, rhetoric and bra-burning stage and progressed into an agenda of consistently bold, forward moving, solidly competent professionals trying to enter the inner circles of power efficiently and effectively. In today's world, this is being achieved without necessarily shocking or cracking the entrenched male presence but molding into it.

One strategy for implementing the goal of equality that has come to the forefront and is frequently considered, is to create and to be a part of a network of professional women. Networking has been successfully utilized by men for a long time. However, it has been argued that a male-patterned network is not professionally useful or psychologically desirable for professional women (Pancrazio, 1982).

The formation of networks by and for women is in itself not new. Within their communities, churches, and volunteer organizations women have traditionally engaged in successful networking of many varied kinds. For example, there are established networks of rural women in the Pacific Islands (Cox, 1988); there are networks of disabled women and girls using role models of successful disabled women in the community (Rousso, 1986); and there are networks of older women and widows (Thompson, 1989), to

mention a few types. However, networking to gain access to the arenas of male organizational power is a heady application which is a relatively new discovery for many aspiring women.

As one would expect, there is a great deal of commonality among definitions of networking. One of the most straightforward and simple definitions is that networking is an information giving and receiving system, a support system and a means whereby women can get ahead in their careers (Duvall, 1980). It is the process of developing and using contacts for information, advice, and moral support as one's career progresses (Welch, 1980). The primary reasons for participating in a network are to gain information and to meet other women (Casbolt & DeWine, 1981). It can be seen as a strategy for solving problems and ultimately effecting change (Metha, 1979).

There is a fairly close relationship between networking and mentoring. Networking and mentoring can comfortably overlap. The sharing of information, the benefits of mutual support, the potential for tutelage and guidance are all features common to both networking and mentoring (Swoboda & Millar, 1986). Networking and mentoring can each be perceived as a strategy for helping to alleviate the loneliness and confusion experienced by upwardly mobile women as they collide with the traditional stereotypic images that work to obstruct many placement opportunities in those positions in which women have not heretofore been visible (Pounder, 1987). These stereotypic images perpetuate myths and biases about women's abilities and group women together in such a way that all women suffer from the supposed ignorance of a few (Gupta, 1983).

Given the value of networking as a career enhancement strategy, what are some factors that work to discourage women from actively networking? Lack of time and lack of information about how to participate in network activities have been cited as two impediments (Casbolt & DeWine, 1981). Certain socialization factors are frequently cited. One of my favorites is the quote that, "basically, young females are underexposed to teamwork and overdosed with the 'innate superiority' of the white male system (Brathwaite, 1986)." It may indeed be true that the lives of adult women are shaped to a greater or lesser

extent by the emotional relationships fostered early in life. These have been described as traditionally reflecting the social roles of daughter, friend, wife, and mother and can color the approaches taken to career decisions and career actions (Cornwall, 1989).

A further theory posits that perhaps the lack of involvement in top-level management positions contributes to women perceiving networking more in terms of information seeking than in information providing (Casbolt & DeWine, 1981). Should this be the case it is possible that the full potential of a vigorous network is not being met and, therefore, its utility is being undervalued.

Whatever the reasons for choosing to participate or not in women's networks, there are some real barriers that women must face if they wish to permeate the glass ceiling. Among these has been specified the inherent structure of organizations. Frequently cited are the old boy network, informal power networks, the use of authority, and the evaluation criteria and giving of rewards (Dohrmann, 1982; Gupta, 1983). The discrepancy between the number of women and men in administrative positions is not ascribable to the lack of proper credentials on the part of women (Dohrmann, 1982). One study contends that the issue that most determines women's progress in leadership and management is pay equity. It concludes that women need to overcome their temerity in dealing openly with financial matters and combine their resources, talents, and energies before they can hope to overcome unequal pay treatment and attain equality (Mathews, 1988). On a practical and personal level there is a need for the professional woman to develop strong leadership skills, to excel in the knowledge of her chosen field, to develop the political ability to know when to back down from an issue, and to learn how to take advice and criticism.

In any event, there are both benefits and pitfalls associated with networking. One scholar has succinctly enumerated the following points as being helpful for the individual who wants to engage in meaningful networking: investment of time; use of business cards; establishment of an organized, structured system; maintenance of a card file classifying members by subject categories; maintenance of social and business contacts; involvement in several different networks; demonstration of trust; and, loyalty

to the network (Duvall, 1980). However, women must be cautious that they do not neglect the substance for the shadow by concentrating too heavily on the lunches and the contacts at the expense of striving for professional excellence (Green, 1982). In conclusion, please remember that the only thing **all** women have in common is the second x chromosome (Rowe, 1989). Each woman has her own characteristics, educational training, management style, career paths and attitudes (Capozzoli, 1989). Networking should not be viewed as a panacea but as a tool for the construction of the future. The forces of change will continue to exert pressure on existing organizational conventions that have had a negative impact on the well-deserved advancement of professional women.

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